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ABSTRACT

In addition to providing a written record of a conference or meeting, the confirming letter helps the public relations practitioner assure that his or her objectives are being achieved. Timing, packaging and salutation, opening paragraph, and closing paragraph are important elements for an instructor to consider when teaching the confirming letter in a public relations course. Content and style must also be considered in order to frame the message in the most effective language. For public relations students to learn the managerial skill of writing an effective confirming letter, they must practice in realistic situations. In a class exercise that simulates realistic contexts, students form public relations agencies and bid for public relations contracts from campus and community organizations. Throughout the process, the students must carry on correspondence with one another, in the form of individual and collective confirming letters. After the outside clients have selected the agencies that will handle their "accounts," those groups not successful in landing clients must merge with the successful ones. Each of the groups must then send a confirming letter to the instructor, outlining the terms of the merger agreement as established in an exploratory session. (HTH)

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PUBLIC RELATIONS DIVISION

TEACHING STUDENTS TO WRITE THE "CONFIRMING LETTER"

-- A BASIC TOOL FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT

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Virtually every teacher of public relations agrees that writing is a basic skill -- perhaps the single most important skill. Thus the syllabus for every good practical course in public relations calls for a heavy dose of writing: news releases, promotional copy, radio and television public service spots, institutional advertising, brochure copy, newsletter articles -- and occasionally an internal memo.

Most of the traditional public relations writing exercises can be categorized as forms of technical writing. Form and format are dictated by the demands of the news media, or by standard public information formats. The student finds ready models in the field. Presuming that he or she is moderately intelligent and has the guidance of a teacher who provides drill and criticism, the technical skills are readily mastered.

But increasingly public relations is a management function, not merely part of the publicity process. The writing skills needed by today's practitioner are those of the manager. And what does a manager do? The job has two phases:

1) meeting with others singly, or in task groups, to establish goals, and
2) translating verbal understandings into action.

The latter function is greatly enhanced by the ability to write effective persuasive correspondence, which might conveniently be referred to as the "confirming letter" -- that is, the written follow-up to an oral transaction.

The confirming letter is more than a simple nicety. In addition to providing a written record of a conference or meeting, it helps the public relations practitioner to assure that his or her objectives are being achieved. Specifically, the confirming letter:

A) reaffirms for the recipient that the sender is organized, serious, competent, and on top of the situation;

B) provides the sender with a method of control over the situation, putting the writer in the position of "reality creation" -- shaping the meaning of what transpired at the conference or meeting;

C) permits the sender to re-state and re-order goals agreed upon during the discussion, and

D) provides motivation for the receiver to get to work on the tasks agreed upon during the conference.

The balance of this paper will examine three factors of importance to the instructor who wishes to incorporate the "confirming letter" into the teaching of basic public relations courses:

* the elements of a competent and effective letter,
* content and style considerations, and
* exercises which make learning the skill "real" for the student.

THE ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE "CONFIRMING LETTER"

As with any public relations message, the letter is an instance of organizing and packaging information and ideas. Accuracy, completeness and neatness are no more or less important in a letter than in a press release or a poster. Once those similarities have been acknowledged, we are ready to look at the special requirements of writing a good letter.

Timing. I suggest to my students that a confirming letter -- which summarizes the understandings reached at a meeting and assures the receiver that the sender will carry through on the proposed actions -- should be dated the day following the meeting. Same date may suggest over-eagerness and an uncrowded personal agenda. Waiting two or three days can hint that the item at hand is not of prime importance. Next day's date gives the impression that you gave it fresh attention at the earliest convenience.

If the sender must wait several days or a week before preparing a letter, it may be the other party who initiates correspondence, which works against some of the objectives of writing the confirming letter, as stated earlier. However, delay sometimes is inevitable. When it occurs, do not offer the standard "I've been so busy lately..." apology, which is freighted with negative public relations value: it as much as says that other projects are more important than the one between you and the other party. Instead, open with an allusion

to what you have been doing since the meeting to further the objectives agreed upon -- seeking input from others, studying available data, or drafting a proposal to a third party. In other words, strive to give the impression that you are as committed to the success of the idea or project as you were during the conference or meeting.

Packaging and salutation. Ideally the letter-writer will want to open with a personal salutation, and perhaps an intimate reference to something enjoyed in common with the recipient. The problem becomes more complex if two or more persons attended the conference or meeting are to receive the same letter. If one attempts to compose too personal a letter to each participant, and if they compare notes, the entire exercise may appear to be too Machiavellian.

Instead, it probably is wise to prepare one letter for all. If one recipient is clearly superior to the others, address it to that person, with copies to the others. If all are relatively equal in position, it may be wiser to frame the letter in memorandum format, which permits multiple or group salutation, with the recipients enumerated in the heading or at the bottom of the page.

Opening paragraph. The opening stanza should be used to frame the situation, re-construct the context, and set the tone for the sender's analysis of the situation. Here the wording must be most carefully chosen, for out of it follows the body of the letter. The data which follow must support the

suggestion or the contention of the critical opening paragraph.

Closing paragraph. The final stanza must summarize the sender's perception of the status of the idea or project. It must also reiterate the action which the sender suggests, or it should solicit additional input: "Please let me know what you think of my suggestions, so that we can begin moving on this..."

CONTENT AND STYLE CONSIDERATIONS

The sender should look at the task of writing the confirming letter as an opportunity to impose order on what probably has been a somewhat disorderly process. No matter how well-run a meeting is, the participants tend to meander, irrelevant topics are introduced, and the proportion of time spent on any particular issue may be out of proportion to its true importance. In the follow-up letter, items which have been agreed upon can be ranked, priorities can be suggested, and a timetable can be offered.

The letter also provides the sender with an opportunity to augment the data. Meetings frequently lack a data base. People tend to speak in generalities. The confirming letter can be used to fill in missing details, as well as to provide new and relevant information which could affect the issue. Notes taken at a meeting should indicate what reprints, previous memos or other file items are relevant and could profitably be routed to

the participants for their consideration.

Once the content of the letter has been decided upon, the most important task is finding the most appropriate shared language for framing the message. The public relations practitioner must analyze and appreciate what terms or phrases will politicize or aggravate the recipients. Whenever possible, the writer should strive to use the receiver's label for an idea or concept, in order to maintain the feeling that his or her ideas are being incorporated into the sender's thinking. The more you can puts your ideas into the frame of reference and style of speaking of the other person, the more likely you are to win acceptance. With practice, the writer can learn to be sufficiently assertive, and yet open to suggestion.

EXERCISES IN REALISTIC LETTER-WRITING

If students of public relations are to learn the managerial skill of writing an effective confirming letter, they must practice in realistic situations. The letters they write must fit in a real, not artificial, context. The rewards and consequences must affect the writer in a meaningful way. The sender of the letter must be able to observe the effects of the message on the receiver, and both formal and informal feedback should be available so that the student can learn what works and does not work in a given situation

At Rutgers University, where the author teaches two courses in public relations (Principles of Public Relations,

and Message Design for Public Relations), the "simulation" technique is used to put the student in a real-world context. Early in the semester, students must form public relations agencies for the purpose of doing projects. Initially, the projects are assigned by the instructor. Later in the semester, outside clients -- campus and community organizations -- present their public relations and promotional needs, and the class agencies "bid" for the PR contracts. The consequences are very real: successful agencies land interesting and challenging clients, while the unsuccessful groups are assigned to less desirable tasks.

Throughout the process of forming the agency, preparing the agency's initial presentation to the community, and bidding for the clients' contracts, the students must carry on a correspondence with one another -- an activity which the instructor monitors by requiring photocopies of all letters. The first confirming letter assignment follows the organizing meeting of the agency, at which basic goals are set and roles for the individual participants are agreed upon. Following the meeting(s), each agency member must write a letter to the others summarizing what has transpired.

Following the exchange of correspondence, each group member fills out a simple item-analysis instrument which permits the instructor and the agency group leader to calculate the difference in shared perceptions of what the group has agreed upon. This simple exercise usually helps the group to identify problems which, were they allowed to continue, could jeopardize the agency's chances for success when the

competition begins.

The second confirming letter is written by one member of the group on behalf of the agency, following a meeting with the instructor, who role-plays a potential client. The instructor, acting as the "University Career Counsellor" makes a presentation to the class concerning the university's purported interest in setting up a trial program to involve area businesses in the campus career-counselling operation. The agency is supposed to translate the idea into a plan of action, setting priorities and drawing up a timetable for the project. The confirming letter is evaluated by the instructor in terms of how well the group understood the task, and how well it packaged its response. The instructor ranks the several letters received from the many agencies, in order to give each group an idea of how successful it was in convincing the recipient of the letter that the agency can handle the task.

Later in the semester, after the outside clients have selected the agencies which will handle their "accounts," the instructor decrees that half of the groups -- those which have not succeed in landing clients -- must merge with the half which has been successful. The pairs of agencies must hold one-hour-long exploratory sessions to decide if and how they will effect a merger. Whatever the results, each of the groups must send a letter to the instructor outlining the terms of agreement, or disagreement, with a copy sent to the other group. If the instructor finds discrepancies, a follow-up session is scheduled to resolve the differences.

Perhaps the finest reward for the instructor who prepares his or her students to write an effective confirming letter...is just such a letter from a graduate, confirming that this very essential writing skills has given the neophyte public relations practitioner a special advantage on the first job.